



STATE ADMINISTRATION
 Exhibit No. 1
 Date 3-13-2013
 Bill No. #57

Blogs

- The GOAT
- The Range
- Heard Around the West

The GOAT Blog

Fire suppression flip-flop

Emily Guerin | Mar 11, 2013 12:00 AM



Last May, the Forest Service made news by announcing it was going to suppress all fires burning on its lands. The memo, issued by James Hubbard, Deputy Chief of State and Private Forestry, instructed fire-line officers to get approval from their supervisors before doing anything but full suppression—effectively discouraging the practice of letting some fires burn for ecological reasons. The idea was to keep small fires from growing out of control, destroying thousands of acres of forest, threatening homes and communities and draining the Forest Service's budget.

The decision was a reversal of a 17-year-old "let it burn" policy that recognized fires as a healthy part of many forest ecosystems, and acknowledged that the Forest Service's previous efforts to stomp out every wildfire could have caused more harm than good. The temporary suspension of the policy drew criticism from scientists and foresters around the country, who thought it was a step backwards (a Forest Service spokesman says Hubbard's memo was not actually a change in wildland fire policy, which hasn't changed since 1995, but a response to conditions on the ground).

Now, the agency appears to have doubled back, and will allow fire management officers to again "use wildland fire as an essential ecological process and natural change agent."



A 2000 wildfire on the East Fork of the Bitterroot River, Montana

Jonathan Oppenheimer, senior conservation associate at the Idaho Conservation League, praised the move, telling *Public Service News* that plenty of science and economics backed the decision. "Putting out every single fire is not good for firefighter safety, it's not good for the environment, and it's not good for the bottom line and the taxpayers," he said.

Even Hubbard himself acknowledged last year's policy shift was not ideal, and suggested that the change was in response to the severity of the 2012 fire season and would hopefully be lifted in the future. "I acknowledge this is not a desirable approach in the long-run," he wrote in the 2012 memo.

But some are criticizing the latest policy directive as light on details. The new memo, which came from Tom Tidwell, the man at the very top of the Forest Service food chain, gives fire-line officers permission to "consider" using fire to meet "restoration objectives" in areas previously identified as having "low threats to values to be protected." How's that for bureaucratic vagueness? From *OnEarth*:

Timothy Ingalsbee, executive director of the nonprofit Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology, interprets Tidwell's new protocols as a return to a more progressive firefighting policy -- even if the Forest Service doesn't want to come right out and say it. "I'd say they're being strategically vague," he said. "They get all kinds of money and praise from Congress for just blindly attacking fire, and no credit for managing it wisely."

Phil Sammon, the spokesman for the Forest Service's Montana office, told *OnEarth* he was waiting for more details from Washington regarding when to allow fires to burn and where. "They haven't really spelled out for us what this means beyond the chief's letter," he told *OnEarth*. "It does look like there's going to be a shift from last year."

It's important for agencies to have clear expectations regarding fire suppression -- especially in the midst of a big blaze. Last year, the National Park Service -- which did not adopt the Forest Service's temporary full suppression policy -- allowed a fire in California's Lassen Volcanic National Park to burn, but it ended up spreading outside park boundaries into Forest Service land. Each agency had a different approach to fire suppression, which caused confusion on the fire line.

Eric Hensel, a fire management officer with Lassen, said the fire taught him a lesson about the importance of communicating expectations. "Even with USFS going a little bit further toward (allowing fires to burn), we can't assume anything," he told the *Associated Press*. "Now we've got some common ground here in terms of our approach, but let's be up front about where we are and work together."

Let's be clear: a return to "let it burn" means the Forest Service will still extinguish 97 to 99 percent of all wildfires -- a marginal improvement over 100 percent. Still, returning to those slightly lower rates of full suppression should come as a relief to those who worried that last summer's directive would become permanent. After all, the conditions that led to the temporary change -- like drought, hot weather and budget shortfalls -- weren't likely to disappear anytime soon.

It's unclear how effective full suppression of all fires last year even was at meeting the agency's goal of saving money: The Forest Service still overspent its 2012 fire fighting budget by \$400 million for a total of \$1.3 billion. And thanks to sequestration, the agency is looking at a fire budget that's \$134 million less than last year, meaning it will be doing less thinning to remove dense vegetation from around communities and other high-risk areas. Let's hope that doesn't worsen what could be another year of disastrous fires.

Emily Guerin is the assistant online editor at High Country News.

Photo courtesy Flickr user catherinetodd2 and USFS employee John McColgan



Good news. Even last year, during Colorado's bad fire season, the Forest Service had some leeway in fire management. For example, the Little Sand Fire, near Pagosa Springs, was allowed to burn away from developed areas once the fire was suppressed around cabins and campgrounds in the early stages. The Forest Service was also very clear in its Inciweb updates that the allowing the fire to burn in the upper canyons was an ecological benefit. <http://www.inciweb.org/incident/2878/>

[Log in to add comments](#)